

NPR Morning Edition, 24 Oct. 1987 -- CII, Blight

We know that President Kennedy's first reaction when he first learned of the missiles in Cuba was, roughly: "He can't do that to me." Prof. James Blight, the Executive Director of the Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University. This week Dr. Blight released transcripts of tape recordings made in the White House during the 13 days of the CMC. Those tapes have been kept secret for 25 years. Dr. Blight calls the tapes "voyeurism of the highest order," because for the first time we are able to weigh the words of Pres. Kennedy and the 18 men who advised him during the crisis. What Dr. Blight has been astonished to discover in the transcripts and through his study of documents and recollections of the CMC is that the more President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev tried to take advantage of each other's weakness, the more they came to recognize their common strengths and fears.

On Oct. 26, in the middle of the crisis, Premier Khrushchev sent a remarkable personal letter to President Kennedy. Officially, in the sections made public, he offers to remove his missiles from Cuba in exchange for an American promise not to invade the island. Unofficially, he appeals directly to the President to understand that it is only the two of them who can prevent the world from being destroyed. "If we do not show wisdom," Mr. Khrushchev wrote, "we will come to clash like blind moles, and extermination will begin. We and you ought not to pull on the ends of the rope on which you have tied the knots of war, because the moment may come when that knot will be tied tight."

Again, Dr. Blight: "He says, 'If we break that knot, Mr. President'... Well, I do not have to tell you what that means. And he didn't. And that is the point."

For American history, the most remarkable disclosure of the transcripts of conversations is the fact that President Kennedy privately complied with Premier Khrushchev's public demand that the U.S. remove from Turkey Jupiter missiles aimed at the Soviet Union. In exchange, the Soviets would remove their missiles from Cuba. In an Oct. 26 cabinet room, many of the President's advisors tell him that the NATO allies will consider such a concession unacceptable. And they press him to destroy the Russian missiles with an air strike or invasion. President Kennedy replies that keeping obsolete missiles in Turkey is not worth war. "We all know how quickly everybody's courage goes when the blood starts to flow," he tells them. "And that is what is going to happen in NATO. When we start these things, everybody is going to say, 'Well, that was a pretty good proposition.' Let's not kid ourselves. Today it sounds great to reject it, but it is not going to after we do something."

As Dr. Blight explains, the President later excused himself from an intense contentious meeting with his advisors for about 40 minutes. "When he comes back into the room, his own coolness and calmness take over. But what nobody in this room knows is that the President has already made the decision that he will place a call to Dean Rusk with the order to call the United Nations to open up a channel through which this Turkish trade can be implemented the following day. I think what we have here is a President who had made a decision that the situation had simply gotten out of hand, and he was not going to have a war."

For the past generation, Americans have grown up with the impression that the U.S. won a victory in the CMC by standing firm against concessions to the Soviet Union. Some of the men in the room during those meetings -- Ted Sorenson, Robert Kennedy -- wrote books about the CMC which never mentioned the President's private accommodation. Again, Dr. Blight:

"Those who have written who would speak for the dead President whom they loved and whom they served have done him more than a slight injustice by characterizing the finest hour as, in spite of themselves, a bit of a victory for a man who would not be pushed around by a lying and deceitful leader of the Communist world. I am tremendously reassured that at this 'moment of maximum peril,' as Kennedy termed it in his speech, that John Kennedy had the good sense to back off. And if we think of it as backing off rather than backing down, we have a fairly accurate characterization of the way both of the leaders ended this situation before it got out of hand."

Premier Khrushchev agreed to remove the Russian missiles from Cuba, also against the counsel of his advisors.

"Nikita, Nikita: what you have given us, you cannot take away." A schoolyard chant in Cuba at that time...

Several years after Premier Khrushchev was deposed from leadership, he told Norman Cousins of the Saturday Review: "When I asked my military advisors if holding fast would not result in the deaths of 500,000,000 human beings, they looked at me as if I was out of my mind, or a traitor. It was all such nonsense. What good would it have done for me to know that although our world was in great ruins, the national honor of the Soviet Union was still intact?" Dr. James Blight believes that although President Kennedy avoided the kind of public retreat Premier Khrushchev felt forced to accept to resolve the crisis, he was also transformed by the experience. Being inaugurated in 1961, the President had said: "We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

But in a speech at American University 7 months after the CMC, President Kennedy spoke of what he now called the senselessness of war: "For in the final analysis, our most basic

common link is that we all inhabit this same planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's futures. And we are all mortal."

Dr. Blight: "It's a little difficult to imagine that the same man made those two speeches a little over two years apart. I think that the question we face, as we look ahead, is: Can we somehow pick up on that, on this guide? Can we manage to learn that kind of lesson, that profoundly, but without getting anywhere near as close?"

The CMC occurred 25 years ago, in 1962. When we were researching the history of the crisis this past week, we noticed that after President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev reached an agreement to remove the missiles, there were still no headlines, speeches or announcements that the crisis had concluded. The world had been chilled by the sudden understanding that nuclear war could destroy the world. And it was difficult to put that fear away.

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Sorenson: "The President wanted the S.U. and the Cubans to realize that we did not regard it as a minor backyard fuss with Cuba, but as a superpower confrontation between the U.S. and the S.U."

Rusk: "In a nuclear world, this takes on special meaning, if a man, or group of men or women, find themselves driven into a corner where they lose all sense of stake in the future, and in that circumstance elect to play the role of Samson and pull the temple down around themselves and everyone else at the same time. President Kennedy was determined to do what he could not to enclose Khrushchev and leave him no alternatives."

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Burlotsky, a speechwriter for Khrushchev: "Khrushchev explained-why Americans have right to surround us with so many bases, including Turkey, and we have no right to do the same thing with Americans[?],"

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RFK worried that....a mistake or misjudgment might ignite a war. "I felt we were on the edge of a precipice with no way off," he later wrote.

[Tomorrow: New disclosures about how the CMC was resolved, and some lessons learned.]

Morning Edition -- Part 2

JFK: "The greatest danger of all would be to do nothing."

McN, recalling "Black Saturday": "As I was leaving the White House to drive back to the Pentagon, a perfectly beautiful fall evening, I thought I might never see another Saturday night."

Saturday morning, a U.S. recon plane was shot down over Cuba. A recent report in the Washington Post, citing classified information, said the plane was shot down by Cuban forces, not the Soviets. If true, the report undercuts the assumption of American policy then that Cuba was simply a client state of the Soviet Union, controlled by Nikita Khrushchev. McN discounts the report, but believes the downing of the U-2 indicated confusion:

"I am quite confident that it was shot down by a Soviet SAM, but not under orders of the Kremlin. It was a mistake. In my own tenure of the Defense department, 7 years as Secretary, I saw countless mistakes of that kind made. And yet that incident triggered, within the group of advisors of President Kennedy, a strong recommendation for immediate military response."

Transcripts released this week reveal that Kennedy was not only restrained in his response to the Soviets and the Cubans; he was almost conciliatory. The transcripts show that Kennedy was willing to concede to Khrushchev's demand and remove American Jupiter missiles...The Jupiters were obsolete, he told his advisors, and not worth the risks of war. "To any rational man, it would look like a very fair trade."

The crisis was resolved without a public swap. The Kennedy administration felt that it could be undermined by criticism that it had given in to Soviet pressure. But the Soviets were privately informed the missiles in Turkey would be removed within months.

Rusk: "If one had to choose between a nuclear war and removing missiles which we had already decided to remove, I think we clearly would not choose nuclear war. Again, it was Khrushchev who in March had said, 'In the event of nuclear war, the living would envy the dead.'"

The popular view of the missile crisis had been that it was an American victory won by JFK's toughness: that he went eyeball to eyeball with Khrushchev, and the Soviet blinked. The fact that information contradicting that was concealed until now upset some critics of American post-WWII policy. Daniel Ellsberg is the former defense analyst who conducted a study of the CMC for the Johnson administration in 1964:

"The fact is that the authority of John Kennedy has been

cited for 25 years in favor of the proposition that it was worth risking nuclear war to avoid a public trade of those missiles. His actual personal opinion was the opposite of that. I frankly think that the people who have kept that secret for 25 years have a lot to answer for."

To other critics, such as Prof. Phil Brenner, Foreign Affairs expert at the American University, keeping that secret helped create a faulty foreign policy: "That superior force will always rule the day. That is one of the dangerous lessons of the CMC, because it was on the basis of that lesson that we thought we could win in VN. Indeed, it seems that the Persian Gulf crisis is a replay of the CMC, and there is no sense that we will get out of this crisis unless we have as much luck as we had then."

Burlotski says the crisis taught him that nuclear weapons can be a strategic limitation: "During this crisis the Americans have 5,000 warheads. We have only three hundred (?). But in spite of this fact, John Kennedy cannot use this superiority. These are excellent lessons for today."

Each side agreed it might have misunderstood the others' motivations. Rusk remembers what former Soviet Deputy Premier Nikoyan told him, shortly after the crisis ended: "He said, 'You know, you Americans must realize what Cuba means to us old Bolsheviks. We have been waiting all of our lives for a country to go Communist without the Red Army. And it has happened in Cuba. That makes us feel like boys again.'"

Bobby Kennedy said the final lesson of the CMC was the importance of placing ourselves in another country's shoes: Again, Rusk: "President Kennedy, at the end of the crisis, told us all that he did not want us to gloat over a diplomatic victory. If Khrushchev wanted to play the role of peacemaker, we should let him do it."

The crisis ended Sunday (with the Soviets dismantling and the U.S. pledging not to invade the island)... For the Soviets and the Americans, the CMC threatened to make the rhetoric of retaliation in the nuclear age destructively real. And it made some of the men who sat in on those decisions wonder about the capacity of men to resolve a nuclear crisis.

Sorenson: "The President was alternately grim and witty, talking about his concern that the children of the world, who had no part of this, would end up paying the heaviest price, and joking about how much room there was in the White House bomb shelter..."

Rusk: "We sustained, for two weeks, this desperate crisis. How long can frail human beings sustain a crisis at that level of intensity? At what point would human weakness step in, and one side or the other would say, 'Oh, to hell with it,' and turn loose the nuclear weapons? I have thought about that, and I think we have to be careful about letting such crises develop, because they are just too utterly dangerous."